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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBAI 001842

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SUBJECT: PROTESTING LABORERS AT DUBAI CONSTRUCTION SITE DAMAGE
PROPERTY

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (e)

1.(SBU) Summary: On March 21, approximately 2500 laborers at a huge Dubai construction site, protesting their work conditions, smashed windows of vehicles and other equipment belonging to their employer. The laborers, 90 percent Indian, then refused to work for another day and a half, leading to approximately one million dollars in combined lost productivity and damaged property. Dubai Police told RSO the incident posed no threat to nearby residents or businesses. Most local press coverage was sympathetic to the plight of the workers and at least one Friday sermon stressed the need to treat workers humanely. End Summary.

Protest at Burj Dubai

2.(C) On the evening of March 21, approximately 2500 laborers at a huge construction site that includes the "Burj Dubai" -- planned to be the world's tallest building on completion in 2008 -- grew frustrated at their work conditions and staged a protest that culminated in large numbers of the workers smashing equipment belonging to their employers. B.S. Mubarak, the Indian Labor Attache in Dubai, told PolEconoff the workers -- 90 percent of them Indian -- damaged roughly 20 vehicles (broken windows and dents from thrown rocks) and wrecked several timecard machines. Mubarak -- who has spoken about the matter with Dubai's Permanent Committee of Labor Affairs -- said the million dollar figure in damages is almost solely lost productivity, rather than damaged property.

3.(U) The protest was covered in the local media, and was even picked up by AP, which led to coverage in the international press. Lieutenant Colonel Rashid Bakhit Al Jumairi, an Interior Ministry official investigating the matter, was quoted in the local Khaleej Times newspaper saying workers trashed on-site offices - breaking windows and computers - consistent with various reports of rock throwing. (Note: In addition to Burj Dubai, the construction site in question encompasses more than 20 other towers being built concurrently. Samsung Corporation, the main contractor for the Burj Dubai, said in a press release that work continued at Burj Dubai itself, and that the protesting workers were idle only on surrounding buildings. PolEconOff drove past the construction site on the afternoon of

March 23 and saw no activity at any of the buildings. While the road offered little view of the surrounding ground level, no evidence of a riot or damaged vehicles was readily apparent. End Note.)

4.(U) The laborers' main complaints centered on poor transportation service from their residence camps to the construction site (requiring long unpaid waits before and after their shift), an insufficient number of timecard machines forcing workers to wait long periods before clocking in and out and causing some "late" workers to be docked pay, and inadequate medical care. Workers did not claim unpaid wages, a common feature of many protests in the UAE, though many called for higher wages and overtime pay.

5.(SBU) Laborers returned to the construction site but refused to work until mid-day March 23, and even then, according to a Khaleej Times eyewitness, only after being threatened with deportation. The Dubai branch of the UAE Labor Ministry served as an intermediary between the workers and their employer, subcontractor Al Naboodah Laing O'Rourke (a private joint venture founded in 1977 between Al Naboodah and John Laing Group of the UK), seeking to identify and resolve the workers' complaints. Labor and police officials condemned the destruction of property but did not make any arrests, vowing to prosecute future vandalism. The company has reportedly already revised the bus schedule, arranged for more timecard machines and agreed to provide better medical care. It will also not dock workers' pay for the protest period or late attendance where they are not at fault, according to Mubarak and the Khaleej Times.

6.(U) Meanwhile, on March 22, around 2500 other laborers also employed by Al Naboodah Laing O'Rourke participated in a brief strike at the construction site of Dubai International Airport's new terminal, as a sign of solidarity.

Dubai Police: Incident Posed No Threat

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7.(C) In response to inquiries related to international press reports of a violent protest in Dubai, RSO spoke with Colonel Abdullah Khan, Dubai Police, who said there had indeed been an incident on March 21 at 1920, in the vicinity of the Burj Dubai. Police confirmed the destruction of some property but indicated there was never any threat. The incident had no effect on residents or businesses in Dubai, most of whom learned about it by reading coverage in local papers Thursday -- two days after the initial protest. Unlike some previous labor protests, the Al-Nabooda workers did not leave their construction site or impede traffic flows. The Burj Dubai construction site is approximately 2 miles south of the Consulate in a large patch of former desert just off Sheikh Zayed Road, a major thoroughfare flanked by hotels and apartment buildings, including several that house Consulate employees.

Widespread Sympathy Toward Worker Conditions

8.(SBU) The incident generated several opinion articles sympathetic to the workers. A Gulf News column stated, "Nothing less than more intensive campaigns to enforce rights of workers and inspection of labor camps can put an end to this problem." Likewise, a government approved Friday sermon in Dubai March 24 extolled the value of treating hired help well. "Employers must not be unjust and not grant laborers their rights, because these laborers have left their homes and children and now they are dealing with loneliness in strange countries in order to help their families."

Comment

9.(SBU) While labor protests are increasingly common in the UAE,

this event is one of very few incidents involving foreign workers featuring violence or rioting. The vast majority of labor protests in the UAE have been peaceful and have not involved destruction of property. The government is trying to defuse tensions before protests happen by offering hotlines to report unpaid wages and asking local consulates to tell their citizens to file complaints with the ministries before engaging in protests.

10.(SBU) Increasing government attention to the plight of many foreign laborers in the UAE, and the recent tolerance for peaceful protest, may indicate the UAEG is moving toward a greater openness to collective worker action, although the UAE has not yet committed to allowing collective bargaining for foreign workers. A year ago, it was highly unlikely that workers would risk protesting, out of fear that they would be immediately deported.

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